DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 904 CS 201 964

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TITLE The Freshman Composition Problem as a Viable Construct.
PUB DATE Mar 75
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (26th, St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); *Educational Philosophy; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Skills; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The freshmen composition program should be a viable construct which will satisfy both the felt and the long-range needs of students, meet the demands of society, and fulfill the ideals of a democracy. These aims cannot be met by an attachment by English teachers to a particular view of language or to a particular teaching concept. The person who teaches composition must be flexible and willing to change. The conscientious composition teacher realizes that good teaching requires effort. In addition, composition teachers must recognize that they are not teaching a subject, but that they are teaching students who must learn to develop a repertoire of English skills if they are to attain their chosen goals. (RB)

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A Paper Delivered at the Conference
on College Composition and
Communication*

St. Louis, Missouri
March 13-15, 1975

*(A division of the National Council of Teachers of English)

3/17/75

CS 201 964

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THE FRESHMAN COMPOSITION PROGRAM AS A VIABLE CONSTRUCT

The Composition Program should be a viable construct which will satisfy both the felt and long-range needs of students, meet the demands of society, and fulfill the ideals of a democracy. These aims cannot be met through an almost paranoid attachment by English teachers to a particular view of language or to a particular teaching concept. The person who teaches composition must be flexible and willing to change. The conscientious composition teacher realizes that good teaching, in the words of Edward B. Jenkinson, "requires a great deal of time, hard work, and intelligence." In addition, composition teachers must recognize that they are not teaching a subject (composition), but they are teaching students who must learn to develop a repertoire of English skills if they are to attain their chosen goals. Ron Smith in a 1974 survey of the composition program in four-year colleges reported some interesting findings, which have implications for composition teachers. He sent questionnaires to 700 four-year colleges and universities randomly selected throughout the United States and the District of Columbia. Hia main finding was that the Freshman Composition Program as we once knew it is disappearing. Thus, the power that English Departments once had to control and coerce great numbers of students for long periods of time is greatly diminished. The battle has already been won by opponents on another ground. He projects, on the basis of the data, that more and more schools will drop the composition requirement. There will be more diminishing of those programs that remain, and there will be a greater use of

equivalency examinations.[1] These trends will continue in spite of the fact that students generally are not writing better and the student enrollment is falling below that predicted.[2]

John Hurt Fisher, former executive secretary of the Modern Language Association, underscores the plight of English teachers and their students when he states that "We have a clientele that doesn't want English the way it has been, and we have a profession that won't have it any other way."[3] It would appear, then, that if composition teachers don't want to win the battle, but lose the war, they will have to reassess the priorities of the Freshman Composition Program. The establishment of these priorities must be based upon three factors: the needs of students, the demands of society, and the ideals of a democracy.

The teaching of composition is somewhat different from the teaching of literature or mathematics, for in the latter areas the teacher begins with a body of material--a text; however in composition, the body of material, or the text, is the student who is about to write something. It is at this point that the student is most vulnerable. He has something to say or he is in a situation where he is forced to write about something and he must order his experiences and present his ideas in a fashion that meets the norm or standard established by the teacher. If he is a conscientious student or if he wants to pass the course, he will have to have some knowledge of the

[1]Ron Smith, "The Composition Requirement Today: A Report on a Nationwide Survey of Four-Year Colleges," College Composition and Communication, May, 1974, pp. 138-48.

[2]See AACTE Bulletin, 26, No. 6 (1973); The Chronicle of Higher Education, 8, No. 7 (1973); A Fact Book on Higher Education, American Council on Education, Issue No. 4 (1972).

[3]See Malcolm G. Scully, "Crisis in English Writing," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Sept. 23, 1974, p. 1, Col. 1.

grammatical choices open to him. This is the first need of the student and it is crucial. The freshman composition teacher must be ever aware that the student has already developed a language pattern through previous shcooling, peer associations, home life, and mass media. What the freshman composition teacher must determine is how best to help the student to choose language that is appropriate to the situation. In other words, the freshman composition teacher must help the student to realize that he "puts on his language as he puts on his clothes." Language that is appropriate in one situation is not appropriate in another. To my mind, the teaching of the concept of appropriateness of language is more in keeping with what we know about language and how it operates. In this way, the disparity between the way the majority of the people use the language and the "correct" language forms presented in textbooks is diminished. The student does not necessarily have to give up his language, but he learns to master other language styles to go along with the one that he already has.

A second need of the student in a composition program is for something to say. Large numbers of students who come to our colleges today represent the first members of their families to finish high school and go to college. Their backgrounds are severely limited. Often they have not read widely, traveled extensively, or lived in environments in which they could hear correct forms. Some are even self-conscious about their speech. Sometimes what they have to say is not what the freshman composition teacher wants them to say. To overcome these disabilities of students and to provide linguistic experiences that will lead to continuous writing growth, the freshman composition teacher must try to put herself in the

place of the student. She not only sympathizes with the student, but she empathizes. She empathizes not to give him a crutch or an excuse for not developing to the fullest his writing potential, but the teacher is aware of the cultural shock which ensues when a student is thrust into an environment that is radically different from the one from which he has come. Because the teacher of composition knows that all successful teaching is both diagnostic and remedial, he or she will not be afraid to employ a wide range of materials and a wide variety of teaching techniques to "fill up the gaps" in the student's background and evoke a response. The fact that the particular skill that the composition teacher is teaching should have been learned in elementary school or high school is of little concern to the teacher. Buck passing may make the teacher feel better, but it does nothing for the student.

A third need of the composition student is the need for success. When a student is not able to write in an acceptable manner, a normal channel of communication is blocked. Frustration results. The freshman composition teacher must know when a student has reached this level and how he (she) can help him to move again to the instructional level, for the student can fail without the teacher. This implies that the freshman composition teacher should be adept, to some extent, in remedial teaching techniques. Another factor that is related to student failure is the high grading standards that composition teachers maintain in spite of the fact that they espouse in theory the concept that learning to write is a gradual process and is influenced by psycho-social factors in the home, school, and community. Furthermore, many of the students in the Freshman Composition

Program are merely fulfilling requirements. They do not plan to major or minor in English. Thus, their needs are quite different from those of the English majors and minors. The use of literature and contemporary essays to teach composition does not prepare an engineering student to do technical writing. The composition teacher often assumes that the student can transfer the particular skill learned to the appropriate situation; but for the student to do this successfully, the teacher must teach for transfer. The freshman composition teacher has as much obligation to help the student to master the skills involved in technical writing as literary writing.

However much we may want to let the student write as he wishes and speak as he pleases, the freshman composition teacher cannot allow it, because society will penalize the student for it. The student's own writing style and own language should be the foundation upon which the teacher hopes to build a linguistically sophisticated student who is disciplined in his thinking and precise in his expression. This does not negate the fact that the student must be allowed to develop a style of writing. I am referring here to style in its broader aspects (not just usage and grammar) as the handling of words in such a way that the uniqueness and individuality of the writer are revealed. Style in this sense comes through having something to say, knowing how to organize it, and being sincere and direct. Plainly, the needs of the student are curtailed somewhat by the demands of society. Ideally, <u>what</u> a person says should take precedent over <u>how</u> it is said. When a student says, "I ain't got a pencil," he is communicating, but he needs to understand that some

people judge other people on the basis of the "correctness" of the forms that they use to express ideas. Thus, it is incumbent upon the freshman composition teacher to help students to develop conceptual judgments in matters of usage realizing at the same time that a student's writings are an extension of his personality. When the composition teacher criticizes the paper, she criticizes the writer of the paper. As one department chairman has said, "one of our responsibilities is to teach students to express ideas clearly and to encourage them to use standard acceptable written and oral communication."[1] One educator has aptly stated the dilemma for the freshman composition teacher when he said that 'the student has a right to his own way of writing, but he has a right to more than that,"[2] for, in essence, society will demand more than that. Plainly, the job of the composition teacher is one that is formidable, but possible. The untapped resource is the student. To suggest that the student who comes into the Freshman Composition Program from a severely limited background can only master one writing style or language pattern is a denial of facts. Research indicates that a student responds to the level of expectancy of the teacher. Teachers who bring excitement to the learning process and encourage students to see how far they can push themselves produce students who can write regardless of previous disabilities.[3]

[1]Dr. Leonard A Slade, Jr., English Department Newsletter, Kentucky State University, February 10, 1975.

[2]The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 23, 1974, p. 1, Col. 1.

[3]See "Project Potential--A Report to the President," Hampton Institute, Hampton Institute Press, June, 1970, pp. 1-90.

Thus, much of the success of a good teacher of composition is not only the result of the teacher's knowledge of language and rhetoric but also the result of his or her sympathy with and understanding of the student who is striving to write about his (her) experiences in an organized fashion. Writing is intensely personal and it is when the student feels he has something to say that he is most open to attack. To learn to communicate in a variety of styles is a form of power and is a necessary part of societal adjustment.

A final factor which should influence the function and scope of the Freshman Composition Program is democratic ideals. Belief in the worth of the individual, respect for the opinions of others, justice tempered with mercy, fair play, and the development of self-discipline and the idea of human perfection are no less the concern of the freshman composition teacher than writing itself. The successful composition teacher knows that the student learns what he lives. If he lives with praise, optimism, mutual respect, success, and charity, he learns that the world is a nice place in which to live. He develops confidence, and he views writing as a form of self-discovery--a kind of "endless becoming." In the final analysis, what the teacher <u>is</u> is more important than what he or she teaches. The democratic spirit is taught by example not precept. Additionally, the democratic freshman composition teacher espouses principles such as the following:

1. The Freshman Composition Program exists for the students, not the students for the Program. Thus, the standards (teaching, grading, etc.) for that Program must be the standard of the maximum development of each student in terms of his potential and the demands of society.

2. The composition teacher must begin where the student is in order to lead him to increased levels of competence. This implies some kind of appraisal of the student's readiness level.

3. The writing environment must be one which evokes student interest and stimulates him or her toward learning to write.

4. The Freshman Composition Program must be individualized to some extent.

5. The Freshman Composition Program must not operate in a vacuum. It must be a sequential unit in the English Program and should be based upon what research indicates about the psychology of learning.

In short, a viable Freshman Composition Program is influenced by student needs, societal demands, and democratic ideals. The correct balance among these three factors as they affect instruction in writing is best expressed in a report made almost ten years ago by the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board. The Commission states, "The pedagogical truth about instruction in writing lies somewhere between twentieth-century emphasis on the joy of learning and the classical emphasis on disciplined thought and precise expression. On that middle ground the teacher of composition takes his stand."[1]

[1]Report of the Commission on English, Freedom and Discipline in English (New York: College Entrance Examination Board Printing Office, 1965), p. 106.